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A PEER COUNSELLING MODEL FOR USE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In this paper a peer counselling program piloted in Windermere Secondary School in Vancouver is described. Peer counselling is defined as a process where students are trained in helping skills to offer, under supervision, listening, support, and alternatives to other students. The procedures followed in implementing the program are discussed; these were identifying the needs of the school, setting program goals, marketing the program to administration, staff, students and parents, training and supervision, establishing peer counselling services, and evaluating the program. The summary and conclusions draw together the strengths and benefits of the program, and make recommendations based on the experience gained during the year.

Résumé

Dans cet article, les auteurs présentent un programme de counselling par les pairs mis à l'essai à l'école secondaire Windermere de Vancouver. Ce programme se définit comme un processus qui habilite les étudiants à appliquer à leurs pairs, et ce sous supervision, des habiletés d'aide, d'écoute et de support. On trouve une discussion des stratégies employées dans la mise au point du programme: identification des besoins de l'école, formulation des objectifs d'intervention, présentation à l'administration, au corps professoral, aux étudiants et aux parents, formation et supervision, mise sur pied des services de counselling par les pairs et évaluation du programme. Pour conclure, les auteurs soulignent les forces du programme ainsi que les bénéfices à en tirer et font des recommandations fondées sur l'expérience acquise au cours d'une année.

Peer counselling has been defined as "a process in which trained and supervised students offer listening, support, and alternatives, but little or no advice to other students." (Carr & Saunders, 1980, p. 4) Carkhuff (1969) established that paraprofessionals could be

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trained in helping skills to a minimally facilitative level in a relatively short time. Numerous studies have shown that this applied as well to adolescent trainees (Gray & Tindall, 1974; Leibowitz & Rhoads, 1974; Sussman, 1973; Cooker & Cherchia, 1976; Tuff, 1977; Haynes & Avery, 1979; Danish, D'Augelli & Brock, 1976). Studies also suggested that students benefit in various ways from contact with peer counsellors; (Anderson, 1976; Carkhuff,

1969; Kosonen, 1980; Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972) and that peer counsellors themselves make positive affective gains during training (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972; Frank, Ferdinand, & Bailey, 1975; Kudlaty, 1979; Woudenberg & Payne, 1978). Peer counsellors have served in a variety of roles in high schools: as group leaders, as tutors, in articulation, in orientation tours, as dispensers of college and career information and as "outreach" counsellors. There is ample evidence to support both the theory and practice of using peer counsellors in high schools.

Overview

In this article, the authors describe their experience which synthesized and put into practice the findings of the researchers and practitioners cited in the introduction.¹ The relevant needs of the school and the program goals are identified, followed by the process of consultation involved in initiating the program. The training and supervision of the peer counsellors is treated in some detail, and the services offered in the school are outlined. In addition, several instruments and the methods used in evaluating the program are described. The summary and conclusions examine the evidence relevant to each program goal, enumerate the strengths and limitations of the program, and include the authors' recommendations.

School Needs

The peer counselling program at Windermere Secondary was developed to meet certain needs perceived by the counselling department. The first was a practical need for a tutoring service for students in mathematics and other academic subjects. While tutors were sometimes available, no organized or trained group existed in the school. The second perceived need was to improve the school climate by offering help to students with problems. Adolescents, it has been noted most often turn to friends, rather than to adults, in times of stress (Birke & Weir, 1976). We hoped to help address this need by creating a trained group of student helpers within the school.

Program Goals

The goals of our proposed program were originally five in number; they were later expanded to include two additional ones. These were:

1. To train students in helping skills.
2. To provide additional resources for students in need of academic assistance.
3. To provide resources for students in need of problem counselling.
4. To provide a source of referral for counsellors and teachers for such problems as poor achievement, absenteeism, or isolation.
5. To provide students with opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with their peers.
6. To involve students in community work.
7. To help create a more positive and caring school climate.

Initiation

The peer counselling program was developed, run, and evaluated by counsellors working within the school. In implementing the program, the support of the counselling department, the administration, and the student body were first obtained. Once the program was underway, staff and community support were sought. The following section describes the steps which were part of this process.

Having received support from the administration and counselling department, the first step was to market the program as an elective course open to senior students. Called "Community Services 11," the course would have two possible options: Tutoring or Peer Counselling. Students could choose either option; both groups would receive the same training, but would employ their skills in different activities. The peer counselling group could do such things as staffing a counselling office before school, at lunch, or after school, operating a drop-in centre, co-leading groups, volunteering in the community, or simply being available in the halls. The tutoring group could assist students experiencing academic difficulties. Twenty-eight students signed to take the course (25 females, 3 males). All students who selected the course were accepted; no selection was employed.

Once the course was established, there remained the task of obtaining the acceptance of the staff, the students, and the community, to whom the services were offered. Once the training program was underway, an information letter outlining the rationale for and nature of Community Services 11 was distributed to staff. This letter also provided teachers with an opportunity to react to the program.

A number of strategies were devised to market the program to the student body as

1. The peer counselling program was developed by Trevor Cole, Doug McIntyre and Gordon Thomas at Windermere Secondary School in Vancouver, B.C.

Peer Counselling

a whole and to the Grade Eights in particular. During the training period, the peer counsellors were introduced at a Grade Eight assembly and attended and helped at a Grade Eight dance. After completion of the training, they visited Grade Eight Guidance classes and co-led Guidance groups. A story was run in the school newspaper publicizing the group and the services offered. In this way, a friendly, helpful image was projected to the student body.

The parents and the community were also informed of the new program. Parents of the new peer counsellors were contacted by phone and mail for consent for their sons' and daughters' participating in the course. The course was explained at this time and positive reactions were received. A local weekly newspaper ran a picture of the group accompanied by an article entitled "Students Help Each Other With Counselling Program." As the paper was distributed to all homes in the area, this was invaluable publicity for the course.

Training

The training program for peer counsellors was planned to introduce students to counselling techniques, tutoring skills, and relevant issues involved in a counselling relationship. Three school counsellors were involved as supervisors and trainers. The training period, which lasted twelve weeks, was preceded and followed by two separate retreats.

Prior to school beginning in September, a letter was sent to all the students who signed up for the peer counselling program. The letter welcomed them to the program and provided information on the first organizational meeting and weekend retreat. The purpose of the letter was to remind the students of the course and build a sense of positive participation.

An integral part of the training program was the day and a half retreat at the end of the first week of school. The purpose of the retreat was to develop a group feeling, to discuss expectations, to involve the students in planning and organizing the program, and to discuss contracting and keeping a journal. At this time, the large group was divided into three smaller groups, called Base Groups, each led by a counsellor trainer. These Base Groups became the basic organizational units, both during training and the post-training

period. The caring, sharing, enthusiasm and closeness that developed from the retreat was instrumental in providing the kind of trust and openness that was necessary to make the training effective.

The training consisted of three forty-five minute sessions each week for the first twelve weeks of the fall term. These sessions were held in the morning from 7:50 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, in a portable classroom which later became the peer counselling room. The training which was based on the *Peer Counselling Starter Kit* developed by Carr and Saunders (1980), was adapted to fit the training schedule we developed at Windermere.

Training sessions covered the following skills areas: (1) Verbal and nonverbal attending skills; (2) an awareness of roadblocks to effective communication; (3) good listening skills with a focus on empathic listening; (4) methods of establishing nonthreatening situations; (5) ways of responding including giving feedback and setting limits by positive confrontation; (6) self-disclosure in communication; (7) introduction to the concept of values; (8) an understanding of ethics, confidentiality, and referral procedures; (9) problem-solving and decision-making skills, and (10) information on community resources. Each of Carr and Saunders' (1980) twelve training sessions were divided into two to give students enough time to practice the communication skills.

The first two sessions each week were devoted to the teaching of communication skills. The third session was used for feedback dealing with students' concerns, making plans for implementing, organizing, and publicizing the program and discussing any problems that may have arisen during the week. This structure was maintained throughout the training period.

The format of each training session consisted of a lecturette on the topic of the day, leader modelling of the skill, a practice period, debriefing, and a five minute period for students to make entries in their journals.

The authors strongly believed from the outset that, to be successful, the program must be student-centered. The weekly format combined a structured approach for the first two sessions with an informal third session to encourage student involvement. The students

were encouraged to participate in implementing, planning, organizing, and publicizing the peer counselling program in the school. Students worked individually or in groups on projects such as: (1) assisting at the Grade Eight dance; (2) designing a peer counselling logo; (3) decorating the portable classroom; (4) organizing a pot luck dinner for the first retreat; (5) designing a referral form for teachers; and (6) organizing the end-of-training retreat. It was felt that the more responsibility the students had for planning and organizing the program, the more it became their program. This increased their commitment and gave them a larger stake in its success.

An added feature of the program was the use of video-taping as a teaching-learning tool. Video-taping was done at the mid-point and at the end of the training sessions. Students were video-taped in a five minute role play. Each student would role play a client with a problem while another student acted as a peer counsellor, practising the skills taught in the training sessions up to that point. With permission from the students involved, the video tapes were then viewed by all the trainees and used as a teaching device. Students critiqued each other's video tapes using a format devised by Ivey and Anthier (1978). The process of viewing themselves and critiquing others was the single most powerful learning experience for the students.

As the training period drew to a close, both the students and the trainers expressed the wish for a final retreat. This became a culmination and a pulling together of all the skills learned in training. It was also a way of sharing the excitement of completing the training, the closeness that developed in the group, as well as anticipating the uncertainty of the next stage, actually working with other students. The activities focused on reinforcing the support group that had developed, dealing with any concerns, outlining social resources in the community, and preparing for reaching out into the school community. The retreat was designed by the students themselves as a bridge which linked the two major portions of the program.

The training was essential in establishing the credibility of the peer counselling program. Not only must peer counsellors be well trained, but the fact that they are trained must be communicated to the rest of the school. The training more than adequately prepared the students for the roles they were to assume for the remainder of the year.

Supervision

At the first retreat, three Base Groups were established, each led by one of the counsellor-trainers. At the conclusion of the training, these became the organizational structures for the balance of the year. In order to provide support for the peer counsellors and to maintain a group feeling, regular Base Group meetings were held during lunch hour once every school cycle of eight days. This was an important time for the peer counsellors to deal with any concerns they had about what they were doing. It was an opportunity to provide them with support and encouragement by giving them some feedback. It was a time for discussing strategies, reinforcing skills, considering referrals, and providing group support.

The supervision of each Base Group was done on an ongoing basis by the Base Group Leader. A schedule was drawn up of the peer counsellors who were on duty every hour of the school day. The peer counsellors would check in with the Base Group Leader and then go to the peer counsellor's portable classroom. Peer counsellors who were working with students on an ongoing basis would inform their Base Group leader where and when they would be meeting.

To maintain contact with the whole group and to provide each other with feedback, a lunch hour meeting of all the peer counsellors was held every fourth cycle (approximately every six weeks). At these meetings groups concerns were discussed and individual experiences were shared. These meetings helped to provide a feeling of unity in the group whose members were working independently of each other.

Peer Counselling Services

The peer counsellors were timetabled so that there was at least one in each subject block during the school day. This assured that there would be a peer counsellor available during any hour in which a student was experiencing some difficulty. If a student was in need of tutoring help, was a behaviour problem in class, or was experiencing personal difficulties, a peer counsellor could meet with the student for all or part of a subject hour with the subject teacher's guidance and cooperation. If this was inappropriate or inconvenient, the option was open to arrange a time outside of regular class time.

Peer Counselling

The majority of students in need of help were referred by a teacher or a counsellor. The counsellor-trainers approached the administration, the Skill Development Center staff, Math and English teachers, English as a Second Language teachers, counsellors and others on an individual basis to explain the peer counselling program and suggest ways in which the peer counsellors could be of assistance to them. The majority of requests for services came verbally to a counsellor-trainer or a peer counsellor.

During the year, the peer counsellors became involved in a number of helping roles in the school. While many referrals were for tutoring, often these students were experiencing problems in other areas of their lives which were affecting their schoolwork. Once rapport was established, these students were able to share their concerns with the peer counsellors. In addition, peer counsellors also offered a number of services to the school. These included orientation of new students, co-leading Guidance groups, working with elementary students, camp counselling, assisting E.S.L. students, operating a drop-in center, and acting as a big brother/sister to younger students. Under the supervision of a Learning Assistance Center teacher, one peer counsellor worked with a learning-disabled student. Many peer counsellors became involved with activities outside regular school hours; one group took a number of disadvantaged elementary students to the park on a school holiday, while others met regularly with their student clients in the evenings or on weekends.

Evaluation

Evaluation was discussed with the group at the first retreat. The students themselves were involved in choosing the criteria of evaluation for report cards. These were attendance and participation at training sessions and meetings; informal leader ratings of levels of basic skills like reflecting content and feeling, focusing on the problem, nonverbal attending, and summarizing; peer counsellor initiative in becoming actively involved in using these skills in some school or community roles; and maintenance of a daily journal recording thoughts and feelings associated with the students' actual experiences in peer counselling. This final criterion involved the student in self-evaluation as well. No attempt was made to formally assess peer counsellor effectiveness with student clients for report card purposes.

In addition to individual evaluation, an instrument that consisted of ten problem statements, each of which was followed by three responses which had been rated by experts on the basis of their appropriateness, was used. One of the three responses was judged to be more appropriate than the other two. This instrument was used to posttest, to assess subjects' ability to discriminate among appropriate and inappropriate responses. The trained group's test scores were compared with those of an untrained group who had agreed to take the course the following year. Analysis indicated that the trained group had significantly fewer errors than the untrained group (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean number of errors, standard deviation
and *t*-test comparison of trained and
untrained groups

Group	N	\bar{X}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Trained	10	3.7	3.6	4.9	< .001*
Untrained	9	11.5	3.4		

* two-tailed test

The same test given to the trained group three months later showed no significant loss of skills (see Table 2). These results suggest that the trained group made significant gains in communication skills and was able to maintain the skills over time.

Table 2

Mean number of errors, standard
deviation and *t*-test comparison of
trained group's post-test and
delayed post-test scores

Testing Session	\bar{X}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	3.7	3.6	.14	N.S.
2	3.6	3.9		

To evaluate the effectiveness of the peer counsellors from the point of view of consumers, three separate instruments were developed. The *Peer Counsellor Effectiveness Inventory for Individuals* was administered to students who worked with the peer counsellors in a one-to-one situation. The *Peer Counsellor Group Evaluation Form* was administered to small groups of students who were led or co-led by peer counsellors. The *Teacher Peer Counsellor Evaluation Form* was completed by teachers who referred students for help or who worked with a peer counsellor. The three instruments all use a 5 point Likert-type response format (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) and incomplete sentences to provide a measure of peer counsellor effectiveness. The instruments were designed to focus on what happened in the sessions (the process) and what the results were (the outcomes).

The results were tabulated by combining the categories "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" and then calculating the percentage of responses which fell within this new combined category (see Table 3).

Table 3

Percentage of subjects who "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed" that they had benefitted from peer counselling

Test	N	%
PCEII	19	65.6
PCGEF	24	74.7
TPCEF	9	66.7

The results indicated that students thought the peer counsellors had been effective in meeting their needs in the areas of tutoring help, interpersonal relationships, and providing information. Teachers supported the idea of a peer counselling program, felt positive about working with a peer counsellor and perceived students who worked with peer counsellors as having benefitted from the experience.

At the end of the year, peer counsellors were asked to evaluate the course as a whole. The statements received showed evidence that many of the peer counsellors made

substantial gains in terms of personal growth. The program also helped several focus on helping careers. The following statements were taken from the course evaluations. "I learned a lot about myself... certain personal things I can't explain." "I learned many skills which I feel are going to help me succeed in life." "It helped me a lot to choose my career and I became a better person for it." "I am very proud to be a peer counsellor." Negative comments were few, and focused on the effect the lack of participation of some group members had on the unity of the group as a whole. The peer counsellors, then, appear to have benefitted in various ways from the program.

Summary and Conclusions

The peer counselling program at Windermere began with a retreat which built closeness and positive group feeling, and ended with a presentation at the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association Conference in Calgary, which brought the group to national attention. The program, by most standards, had to be judged a success. This is shown by examining the evidence relevant to each program goal.

Goal 1: The results of the fixed-response instrument administered to the peer counsellors indicated that they had made significant gains in choosing empathic responses. The video tapes also showed evidence of a significant increase in helping skills from the middle to the end of the training period. The tapes were rated by the trainers and trainees in the dimensions of attending skills, paraphrasing, reflecting feeling, summarizing, and effective questioning.

Goal 2: During the year, peer counsellors were used extensively as tutors in English, Mathematics, French, and Social Studies. Referrals came from subject teachers, parents and students themselves.

Goal 3: Sample responses to the statement, "What I like most about meeting with a peer counsellor was..." in the *Peer Counsellor Effectiveness Inventory for Individuals* included "I could tell her things I couldn't tell other people," "She helped me," "I can talk over some of my problems," "She understood what my problem was and helped me." These statements suggest that peer counsellors were providing a resource for students in need of problem counselling.

Peer Counselling

Goal 4: The majority of referrals came from counsellors and teachers. These covered a range of problems including: low self-esteem, absenteeism, isolation, and poor achievement. Sample responses to the statement, "If other teachers were to ask me about the peer counsellors, I would say the following..." in the *Teacher Peer Counsellor Evaluation Form* included "they have performed a useful service beyond those offered by the usual school services," "they have worked closely with their students in both academic and interpersonal difficulties," "a peer counsellor is able to reach the students in a way that a teacher cannot."

Goal 5: Sample responses to the statement "The thing I liked most about the group was..." in the *Peer Counsellor Group Evaluation Form* included "That we got to share our feelings about things and weren't put down for it," "That everyone was friends and we all contributed to the class discussion," "We learned how to communicate better with people." This evidence would suggest that peer counsellors were instrumental in helping students develop more meaningful relationships with their peers.

Goal 6: Peer counsellors were involved in the community through camp counselling and helping at an elementary school.

Goal 7: Much of the above evidence indicates that the peer counselling program, in meeting some of the needs of the students and staff of the school, contributed positively to the school climate. In addition, sample responses to the statement "other comments" in the *Peer Counsellor Group Evaluation Form* included, "The peer counsellor was very friendly and helpful," "the peer counsellor was nice and she really seemed involved in what we were doing," "I think the peer counsellor should come into more of my classes. She is a good friend to have."

In piloting the peer counselling program, the authors became aware of some areas that could be improved. The majority of students successfully made that transition from training to employing their skills in the school setting. However, it became apparent that not all students are suited to the peer counsellor role. A selection process may increase the number of students who become successful peer counsellors. Studies suggest that average academic ability (as opposed to high or low), concern for others, and openness predict

success in peer counselling (Anderson, 1976).

The program was implemented without initially consulting the entire staff. Involving staff more directly in the planning stages may increase acceptance of, and enthusiasm for, the program.

Finally, a word of caution to those considering a peer counselling program. Implementing a program, selecting suitable candidates, choosing appropriate training materials, conducting training sessions, and supervising peer counsellors takes a considerable investment in counsellor time, yet counsellors have an obligation to their client population to ensure that all these conditions are met at least adequately. The authors believe that this is time well spent, but realize that not all school counsellors have the time to devote to peer counselling. These factors should be weighed carefully before any decision is reached.

In conclusion, the peer counselling program has been effective in meeting some of the needs of students in tutoring help and in interpersonal relationships. The program has been well received by students, teachers, and counsellors.

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